

THE HIGH COST OF CURRENT MEDICAL PERIODICALS

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The high cost of literature, medical or secular, is a mathematical function of the high cost of living, in other words, of the inflation of values which came in with the World War and went on expanding until the bubble burst in the financial crash of 1929. The World War brought about ominous transvaluations everywhere. Its abrupt onset got on peoples' nerves and, in consequence, everybody, from bell-hop to bull-head, from roustabout to ruler, got the war "on the brain." It became the common staple of conversation, displacing even the matutinal commonplaces about the weather. People talked about it incessantly, in most cases from a dim realization of the fact that it spelled the end of the old order of things, the destruction of a decadent or worn-out civilization, the eventual triumph of the machine over man, of hands over heads. Our own country, albeit professedly neutral, became in reality, a virtual museum of ethnology, with race divided against race to the mathematical limit of "find the American," and a strong sectional division of opinion between East and West. By the time of our entry into the War, many engaged in intellectual pursuits began to find their occupations gone. College professors found themselves lecturing to empty benches, literary people perforce made the war their centric theme, publishers' agents deliberately activated the production of literature of military interest, even stenographers, secretaries and touch-operators faced unemployment *via* sadly diminished incomes. With our entry into the war, however, everything "clicked." Many people flocked to the colors as to a band-wagon of employment. College professors took on military avocations in mufti or in uniform. Over 30,000 American physicians were commissioned officers in the Medical Reserve Corps, and the draft did the rest. Even under the new dispensation, civilians passed rapidly from one military employment to another and there was a constant cry for more personnel. In consequence of all this, human life and labor at first cheap, became more and more expensive, as time wore on, while the prices of food, raiment, shelter and the material of war soared to unheard of heights. At the same time, since money is "the sinews of war" and armies travel on their bellies, the all but bankrupted allied nations borrowed liberally of the United States and some of these moneys were not spent for military purposes. By Armistice Day, our whole nation was virtually mobilized for war. At the end of 1918, when people began to drift back to their old civilian employments, the cost of labor was as high as that of food and raiment. Machine gun operators and experts in motor mechanics from the front were offered salaries of \$25,000 per annum, on the theory that wartime experience had made them masters of "mechanical ability," i. e. of insight into machinery and the science of mechanisms of precision. It was hard to get hold of mechanics, electricians, gas-fitters, steam-fitters, messengers and ordinary day laborers of whatever kind. The influenza epidemic of 1918-19 demonstrated an appall-

ing dearth of doctors and nurses, so much so, in fact, that after the war, hundreds of American cities in our most progressive states turned out to be utterly devoid of physicians and had to resort to public health nurses for medical aid and attention. The post-war wave of profiteering, top-notch prices and general "prosperity" went on unabated up to the panic of 1929. Only a few sensed "the rumble of the distant drum," in other words, that, as Dr. Fabian Franklin observed, the high cost of living was the cost of high living and would eventually have to be paid for. The "prosperity" of 1918-28 has been described as a Pactolian flood of gold, flowing down incessantly, securing million dollar gate-receipts to pugilists and royal incomes to movie-queens, apparently unexhaustible, but ending as abruptly as it began. By 1930, the grim ghost of unemployment began to stalk abroad, food, raiment and other material commodities began to get cheaper, England fringed the abyss of bankruptcy through the dole, Germany went bankrupt anyhow, and the Central and Eastern European nations were on the verge of falling between the two stools of Fascism and Sovietism. The world was either to be capitalized or communized, in either case, to be brutalized, in lieu of the sane *medium tenere tutissimum*.

And what was happening to medical literature all this while? Maintained at the ordinary level for a few weeks after the declaration of war, it had, by the beginning of 1915, deteriorated perceptibly, both as to quality and quantity. In Russia after the Revolution, it became virtually nonexistent, and while Germany, Italy, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries kept up their quota fairly well, several important French periodicals were discontinued in mid-course, England cut down on the publication of books at a certain point and Austria, in particular, Vienna, experienced the extremes of war-impoverishment. For a long time after the Armistice, the quality of the output of medical literature was poor or trivial. Even the German medical journals of the period were full of trash, and until the old *valuta* of the *Reichsmark* was established, there seemed to be little incentive to improvement. With the rehabilitation of the *Reichsmark*, however, the fictive high prices of medical periodicals, which had obtained perforce under lower *valuta*, were maintained. In other words, physicians and medical libraries found themselves paying unheard of prices for these items. Something similar has been going on latterly with regard to the prices of a few American medical periodicals since the financial crash of 1929. The exhaustive tabulation by Robert and Schaltenbrand, in this number, goes to show, in fact, that the foreign rates of some current European medical periodicals are no higher than those of some American medical periodicals, of the same quality and format, since the slump of 1929. The great stumbling block, for medical librarians and research workers of moderate income, has been the cost of certain German medical periodicals of strictly scientific type, printed in the very best manner, on superior paper, sometimes with expensive illustrations, but at rates which are now prohibitive. Single numbers of these periodicals may cost anywhere from \$5 to \$10. A volume usually comprises 4-6 of such numbers, and in the case of such periodicals

as *Virchow's Archiv* or the *Biochemische Zeitschrift*, there may be as many as 4-14 volumes per annum, bringing the annual subscription rate up to around \$100. This would have been unthinkable before the war. On the other hand, these very periodicals, almost without exception, pay the scientific physicians who contribute articles, at a flat rate of 40 marks per 16 pages and 100 reprints for articles of not more than 16 pages (50 reprints for longer articles). They seldom, however, state a flat annual subscription rate, which is disingenuous, although the high price of separate numbers is sometimes featured at the bottom of the cover. English and American medical periodicals, of the same scientific type, almost invariably state the annual subscription rate on the front or back or within the cover. Very few of the English and almost none of the French or American medical periodicals pay their contributors or furnish reprints *gratis*. As a rule, too, payment to contributors is sometimes confined to citizens of the country, or to put it differently, contributors, since the war, are usually native sons and the outland contributor, who expects an honorarium, will find himself at pains to collect it. It is like the old proverb of Scotch fisher folk: We maun gie our ain fish-guts to our ain sea-mews.

From the careful tabulations made by Messrs. Robert and Schaltenbrand in this issue, it is plain that the foreign subscription rates of American medical periodicals of whatever type are usually lower and more reasonable than those of European periodicals of the same type; that the cost of the big German weeklies, of the type of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* is lower than that of the *British Medical Journal* or the *Lancet*; that the cost of the French medical periodicals is, at present lowest of all, by reason of the extremely low *valuta* of the franc, and that the cost of the German medical periodicals of scientific types is, in some cases, prohibitive. At the same time, the subscription rates of certain foreign and domestic periodicals approximate to about the same figure. The first group covers items at \$5-\$6 per annum. Of these *Brain* (26), *Human Biology* (54), *Isis* (56) and *Janus* (57) might be described as bargains. In respect of quantity and variety of material and illustrations, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, at \$3.50 per volume, is the most reasonable of all in price. With regard to quality of material, the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* (12 numbers at \$2 per annum) is the most exemplary and deserving medical periodical in the world. Items in Group II are to be had at about \$7 per annum, items in group III at about \$8-9 per annum, items in Group IV at about \$10 per annum. Looking into the German items, it will be seen that prohibitive rates usually attach to periodicals characterized by expensive paper printing, illustrations and extra quantity of material. The *Biochemische Zeitschrift* comprises annually anywhere from 6 to 14 volumes at the flat rate of 28 marks per volume of 6 numbers. By comparison with the average periodical at \$6.75 per annum, this may not seem excessive, in view of the quantity of the material produced, material which may cover as much as 1½ linear feet (or 0.75) cubic feet of shelf-space per annum. But in respect of quality of material,

this journal is far inferior to *Hoppe-Seyler's Zeitschrift*, published in four volumes (at \$14.40) *per annum*, which has steadfastly maintained a fine and noble tradition for superior output, at moderate cost, to libraries and laboratory workers. Were it not for the volumes of *Biochemische Zeitschrift* published during 1906-14, it would almost seem as if this journal were cashing in on the possibilities of post-bellum profiteering *via* mass production. Yet the contributors to the 14 volumes of *Biochemische Zeitschrift* published during 1930 (covering 6890 pages) must have received \$4134 for their articles at \$0.60 per page, apart from the 60-100 reprints furnished for each article, which would also cost something. This journal would seem to outpace all others in mass production. In the eyes of biochemists, it connotes quantity, where the Hoppe Seyler Zeitschrift connotes quality. By comparison, the annual subscription rate of the *English Biochemical Journal* (\$17) does not seem excessive, if we consider the enormous size of the individual numbers, each a volume in itself. On the other hand, \$79.50 for 3 annual volumes of *Archiv fur Entwicklungsmechanik*, \$103.57 for 4 annual volumes of *Archiv fur Psychiatrie*, \$86.75 for 4 annual volumes of *Archiv fur Gynakologie*, \$95.60 for 4 annual volumes of *Archiv fur klinische Chirurgie*, \$111.98 *per annum* for 4 volumes of *Virchow's Archiv*, \$134 for 3 annual volumes of the *Zeitschrift fur Anatomie* is decidedly excessive, even when we consider the superior quality of paper and printing and the many photographic illustrations, in lieu of the old lithographic plates. The American equivalent of such journals as these is *The American Journal of Physiology* at \$24-\$32 for 3-4 annual volumes; yet, in view of the quantity and the high quality of the material, this is not excessive by comparison with the annual rates just listed. Considering the profusion of photographic illustrations in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, it is obvious that other expensively illustrated periodicals cannot compete with the A. M. A. Journal in extent of sales and subscriptions (over 90,000 copies). Along with the German periodicals above listed, the biggest sinners in respect of prohibitive prices are the *Ergebnisse* (\$18-30 for a single annual volume), the *Archiv fur Dermatologie* (\$92.25 for four annual volumes). *The Chemisches Centralblatt* (\$50 for one annual volume), *The Journal fur Psychologie und Neurologie* (\$60 for 2 annual volumes). *The Zeitschrift fur die gesamte experimentelle Medizin* (\$173.30 for 6 annual volumes), *The Zeitschrift fur klinische Medizin* (\$74.55 for 3 annual volumes), *The Zeitschrift fur Konstitutionslehre* (\$82.25 for 3 annual volumes) and the *Zeitschrift fur Zellforschung* (\$123.66 for 3 annual volumes). These prohibitive subscription rates are said to be controlled and maintained by one or two publishers, who monopolize the business. Robert and Schaltenbrand show that the German periodicals cost annually \$3,204.32 or five times more than the American (\$577.18), eight times more than the British and sixteen times more than the French. Over 70 per cent of money available for periodical subscriptions goes to Germany. And these German periodicals cover over 52 per cent of the total number of volumes obtainable from all countries and over 47 per cent of the total number of pages in such volumes. In other

words, the articles in the periodical literature of recent German medicine are extraordinarily lengthy, prolix and verbose, and about this matter, the best type of German savant will make merry on occasion, if you can draw him out. Legal documents are often so wordy as to be unscientific and therefore unintelligible, for the reason that scribes of old time were paid by the word, hence made such documents as prolix as possible. In like manner, contributors to modern German medical periodicals are apt to make their *Arbeiten* long and stodgy, because it pays more and because lengthier contributions have the air of being more learned. As with many specimens of recent fiction by money-making scribes (Owen Wister's "irregular practitioners"), what could be said in a dozen pages or less is spread out to cover 100-150. Nothnagel once told one of these 100-page investigators that the greatest scientific contributions to medicine seldom cover more than a few pages or so, nevertheless he would "try to read his article." Another ironical professor was given to weighing such contributions in a scale, as if the mental energy required to produce them were expressible in foot-pounds. We may be sure that neither he, nor any subsequent inquirer after knowledge would be foolish enough to attempt to read them. Indeed, it is common opinion that no specialist in medicine could hope to read all the current literature on his specialty and retain his reason. The proposition to set off the difficulty by monthly and annual collections of abstracts for each specialty, some of them covering three volumes per annum and costing anywhere from \$8.50 to \$68 yearly, or \$770.95 *in toto*, would not seem to help matters much. Experienced librarians know that monthly abstracts, reviews and year-books of medical literature are seldom consulted, for the reason that such abstracts, unless done by a master-hand are frequently misleading and often miss the true inwardness of a book or article. It takes a great deal of ability, real knowledge and intellectual courage to write an informing, truth telling review of the tritest book, and the elaborate *pointillisme* implicit in an endless array of abstracted material is just as fate-giving to the mind as the same number of relatively commonplace themes exploited, each of them, on canvases of vast dimensions. The slogan for the future would, or should, be: A humane habit of brevity at the source. As Billings put it, first have something to say, then say it as briefly as possible, stop when you have said it, and give your paper an informing title, telling your readers at the start just what it is all about. In the matter of lengthiness, all of us are hardened sinners. Even this paper is too long. In my boyhood days in Washington, the offices of business men were often adorned with a picture of a man in a coffin, bearing the legend, "This man was talked to death." So, too, Stendhal once threatened to sue a pitiless talker for "making an attempt upon his life." To great segments of recent matter in medical periodicals, the *Satz vom heiligen Schiller* is still apposite and applicable: *Was ist der langen Rede kurzer Sinn?*